

## THE OATH

The classroom was almost completely dark. The candle on the teacher's square desk under the icon gave just enough light to see the men in the front row. They were all in heavy sheepskin coats, open at the neck, their gray beards lost in the grayness of the fur. Bushy eyebrows, knotty hands that looked as if they were covered with bark. Unblinking eyes, neither friendly nor hostile.

I could not see the faces of the younger people sitting and standing in the rear. Women pressed along the walls and in the aisle between the benches. Many teachers had remained for the meeting, to learn from us how to preach revolution to the peasants.

Thomas opened the meeting by introducing us. "These people came from St. Petersburg to help us," he said. "You may trust them."

I spoke about the progress of the revolution, falling unconsciously into the style I had used in the church meetings in St. Petersburg. The audience was silent, the faces of the old men in the front row revealing nothing.

Then Eugene talked about the teachers' convention. The audience seemed uninterested. Eugene shifted somehow to the war and the privations of soldiers in the Far East. Why were they sent so far from their homes? He described the trains with recruits in the early days of the war, the weeping women on the platforms, mothers running after the trains along the rail tracks. . . .

Sobs and laments came from the darkness. The old men in the front rows threw disapproving looks toward the rear. Eugene went on, "How many boys came back crippled for the rest of their lives? How many were buried in foreign soil? Will you ever see the loved ones for whom you are still waiting?" Laments became louder, and the old men no longer tried to stop them. I saw tears on some weathered faces in the front row.

"Did the people start this war?" Eugene asked. "Did anybody ask you, the people of Russia, whether you wanted this war? How many other wars will come if the fate of the nation depends on the whims of a single weak-minded man?" And then he concluded, "To insure peace, the people must be the masters of their destiny."

After a brief silence one of the old men said firmly, "That is true." The ice was broken. Everyone spoke at once. In the flickering light of the candle I scribbled a resolution. Thomas, to whom I showed it, whispered to me, "Make it a decision of the community."

I changed a few words at the beginning and, when the noise be-